

**Watchwords by Officer Tom Hanshaw**  
**June 22, 2012**

A couple weeks back I happened to strike up a conversation with a young lady as I was picking up my uniform at the cleaners. She asked if I could spare a moment and answer a question she had about her furry friend, which accompanied her in the car. She asked if police officers could or would stop a motorist because of a dog sitting on the lap of the driver. She also added she'd been stopped in another community a bit earlier. She had not received a citation but did not feel she had really done anything wrong.

Under Massachusetts Motor Vehicle Law, operators may be stopped and cited for "impeded operation," if anything in their vehicle impairs their driving. "Impeded operation" could cause a driver to disregard a sign, drift from marked lanes, follow too closely or even neglect to use a directional signal for example. Some causes of "impeded operation" could be the radio dial, a cell phone, food or beverages or even a pet. In most cases, the distraction does not lead to a crash but sometimes it does.

In terms of pets, they seldom cause a motorist to be involved in a car crash. In fact, over my 25 year career, I can recall only one case when a pet's action led to a crash; and it was actually a cat in a carrier; never try to pet a frightened cat that's confined in a carrier. Despite the fact they rarely cause an issue for a driver, I strongly urge motorists to avoid letting pets ride on their lap when driving. It's extremely dangerous for the animal, especially smaller dogs. You never know when a crash is going to happen and there's very little time to prepare when you realize one is inevitable.

If you are involved in a crash and there's a dog on your lap, it's very likely he or she will be seriously injured or killed if the crash is severe. In a crash when the air bag is deployed, the dog will be caught between the driver and air bag. It's also likely the dog, if not restrained, will be thrown about the inside of the vehicle or ejected. A few days after we spoke, one of the television news stations actually had a story about pets in vehicles and the dangers of car crashes. Crash-test dummies were used to simulate the conditions of a crash and the visuals were frightening.

A number of pet restraint products are available for pet owners, wherever pet supplies are sold. Many pet owners think of their cat or dog as one of their children; leaving a child unrestrained in a motor vehicle is dangerous and illegal. You wouldn't drive with an unrestrained child in your car, so don't do that practice with a pet either. So when it comes to pets in the vehicle, it's not so much about being against the law as being very dangerous. Police don't want to issue a citation to a pet owner but we don't want to see a tragedy either. Consider the purchase of a device to secure your pet as you cruise about in your vehicle. Hopefully you'll never need it but knowing one is available will give you comfort.

As part of this year's Amesbury Days, Officer Jon Morrill and I will be at the Amesbury Park on Saturday, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, between 10:00 am and noontime with some bicycle safety information. We'll be set up on the Highland Street side of the Park, near the Bleachers, as part of the Fitness Day of activities. Joining us will be staff from The Amesbury Skate & Sport Shop,

to offer a free bicycle equipment check-up. For the younger riders, we'll have a small bicycle rodeo course set up and a few other surprises. Stop by and say hello as we kick off the 2012 summer riding season on a safe note.